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Cover photograph of a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher  
by Nova Silvy

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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Washita

*National Wildlife Refuge*



*The 8,200-acre Washita National Wildlife Refuge is one of more than 500 refuges throughout the United States managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service. The National Wildlife Refuge System is the only national system of lands dedicated to conserving our wildlife heritage for people today and for generations yet to come.*

## **Welcome: Canada Geese Magnet**

*“They tumble out of the sky like maple leaves, side-slipping right and left to lose altitude, feet spraddled toward shouts of welcome below.”*

Aldo Leopold could easily have been describing the more than 40,000 geese that punctuate the quiet beauty of the 8,200-acre Washita National Wildlife Refuge each winter. Within the refuge, the slow-moving Washita River winds through prairie and farmlands to merge with Foss Reservoir,



## *Ducks in the Moist Soil Unit*

FWS photograph

providing a home and resting area for geese and other waterfowl. Gently rolling hills, ravines, and bottomlands laced with creeks shelter wildlife as common as white-tailed deer and as exotic as the Texas horned lizard, a state protected species.

## **Wildlife: Numbers Swell With the Seasons**

Mark your calendar for Washita NWR's procession of migrating birds. Seasonal timetables vary with the weather, so exact dates are hard to pinpoint. For instance, you might see fewer than a thousand geese one day in October, then return two days later after a cold front to hear the honking of 20,000 geese settling into their winter life here.



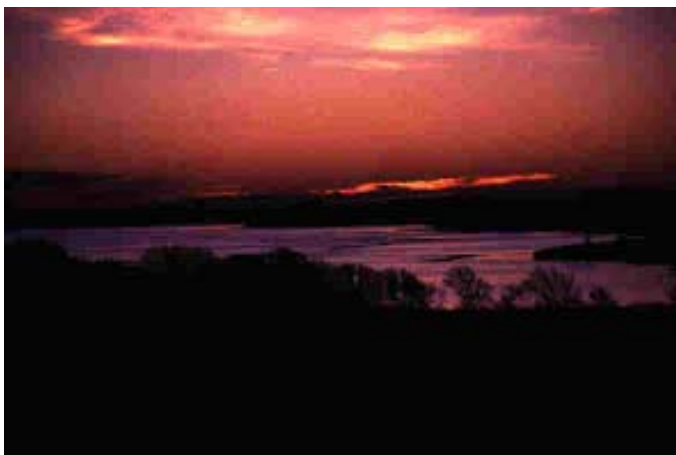
*Fall/Winter  
Peak Bird  
Watching*

November through February brackets the best times to see thousands of waterfowl. Snow geese lift from the waters in a blur of white wings. Canada geese are joined by smaller numbers of Ross and white-fronted geese. Mallards top the duck list, followed by common mergansers (January is their peak month) and pintails.

The restless waterfowl flocks attract instant attention, but sharp-eyed wildlife viewers will notice sandhill cranes along the shorelines and in fields in fall. As many as 3,000 may pass through in early November. White pelicans drop in as well to pursue fish in Foss Reservoir before flapping southward. Bald eagles find the open, goose and duck-filled waters good hunting grounds each winter.

Swainson's hawks prey on small rodents in refuge fields to replenish their energy for the long flight to South America. Bird watchers have spotted as many as 200 in a field in early October! When reservoir levels drop to expose mudflats close to river inlets, migrating shorebirds take advantage of a fall rest stop. American avocets probe the mud for crustaceans, joined by greater yellowlegs, killdeer, and sandpipers. Look for shorebirds again in spring.

*(Above) Aerial  
view of lake,  
FWS photograph*



### *Spring/Summer Migrants Give Way to Nesters*

When sandhill cranes fly through in spring, refuge staff always look closely to see if they are joined by any endangered whooping cranes. America's tallest bird sometimes graces the refuge fields with its presence in fall, and occasionally in spring.

In early May, pairs of Mississippi kites, neotropical migratory birds fresh from a winter in South America, build their stick nests high in trees along watercourses. Unlike most birds of prey, these slim-winged birds thrive mostly on a diet of insects pursued in flight.



### *Scissor-tailed Flycatcher.*

Photograph  
by J. Beall

The scissor-tailed flycatcher winters south of the border and nests at Washita NWR as well. Watch for Oklahoma's state bird sporting its showy, split tail from a high-wire perch.

Summer features cliff and barn swallows nesting under bridges, snowy egrets wading in the shallows, and resident red-headed and red-bellied woodpeckers drumming in the forests. Roadrunners dash by the headquarters office.

(Above)  
*Oklahoma sunset,*  
FWS photograph



*Mammal Life:  
Prairie Dogs to  
White-Tails*

Spring marks a flurry of activity in the black-tailed prairie dog town close to the refuge headquarters. You'll see them sunning on top of burrows one moment, and racing to safety the next. Prairie dogs or smaller rodents make up a good part of the diet of predators like coyotes, hawks, badgers, and elusive bobcats. The headquarters area is a good spot to see armadillos, dwelling at the northern edge of their natural range.



Away from prairie dog terrain, white-tailed deer hide in wooded old river channels and feed in refuge fields. Beavers cut trees along the waterways. Porcupines climb trees to feed on twigs, buds, and inner bark.

**Growing Crops  
for Wildlife**

Canada geese spending winters at Washita NWR thrive on fields of wheat and milo grown especially for them. The hungry birds feed on green wheat first. When the temperatures drop, they shift to the richer milo. Some 2,000 acres of croplands stretch across the flatlands. Local farmers grow crops here, taking part of the harvest and leaving the rest for wildlife.

*(Above, top)  
Prairie dog.*

Photograph by Tom Cloud.

*(Above) White-tailed deer,*

FWS photograph

Imagine watching bison herds cutting

## Wildlife Watching Tips

Dawn and dusk are the best times to see wildlife.

In warmer climates, little is moving on hot summer afternoons or on windy days.

Observe from the sidelines. Leave “abandoned” young animals alone. A parent is probably close by waiting for you to leave. Don’t offer snacks; your lunch could disrupt wild digestive systems.

Cars make good observation blinds. Drive slowly, stopping to scan places wildlife might hide. Use binoculars or a long lens for a closer look.

Try sitting quietly in one good location. Let wildlife get used to your presence. Many animals that have hidden will reappear once they think you are gone. Walk quietly in designated areas, being aware of sounds and smells. Often you will hear more than you will see.

Teach children quiet observation. Other wildlife watchers will appreciate your consideration.

Look for animal signs. Tracks, scat, feathers, and nests left behind often tell interesting stories.





## History: Piecing Together the Past

a swath through the prairie wildflowers you can see today on the refuge. Archeological finds in the area revealed bison horns, antlers, stone scrapers, and stone points from nomadic hunters who survived here centuries ago. A camp site and burial ground discovered above the Washita River dates to the 1500s. The nomads returned to the same camp each year on their journeys following wildlife herds.



Remember, all archeological sites and finds are protected. Taking artifacts not only breaks the law, but destroys a story line connecting us to our past.

Washita NWR lies in the heart of Cheyenne and Arapaho country. Thirty miles west marks the 1868 Battle of Washita. Many Cheyenne and Arapaho men, women, and children died in battle against General George Custer and his troops. In 1892, the United States bought the lands from the tribes and opened them up immediately to homesteading. Cheyenne and Arapaho still live in the area. Two observation decks offer vistas

*(Above) Flooding impoundments.*

*(Below) Kids with birding scope,*

FWS photographs



## Things to do at the Refuge



### *Visit the Refuge Headquarters*

of wintering waterfowl. County roads next to the refuge provide access to Owl Cove, Pitts Creek, and Lakeview. Anglers catch white bass, saugeye, and channel catfish in refuge waters. Washita NWR also offers limited hunting.

Stop in the refuge headquarters for information during office hours. Pick up a bird checklist and tips on birds to look for that day. An outdoor kiosk features a map and information about recreation, waterfowl, and seasonal birding.



Don't miss the observation deck behind the office. You'll have an excellent view of wintering geese feeding in farm fields. Interpretive panels feature history of the Washita River, its birds and animals, and farming for wildlife.

The black-tailed prairie dog town adjacent to the headquarters offers a rare glimpse into the past when native prairies seemed to roll on forever.

### *Wildlife Watching and Photography*



Wintering flocks of geese and spring migratory birds attract wildlife watchers in abundance. In addition to the observation deck by headquarters, you'll find wildlife viewing from a deck at Owl Cove near the Washita River Inlet.

### *Hiking*



The refuge lacks designated hiking trails. However, feel free to explore on foot from Owl Cove, Pitts Creek, and Lakeview. Remember to check the map for closed areas on the refuge. Generally, areas north of the river channel are open year-round. All permitted hunting on the refuge

*(Above, top)  
Class in field.  
(Above)  
Prairie dog,  
FWS photographs*

## *Hunting*



must follow all state regulations. Additional restrictions apply. Contact the refuge office for details.



*Bobwhite.*

FWS photograph

Certain portions of the refuge are open to quail and cottontail rabbit hunting.

Please contact the refuge for information on goose and sandhill crane hunting by permit only.

The refuge does not allow turkey, dove, or duck hunting anywhere on the refuge.

Only shotguns are permitted. Rifles and handguns are illegal on the refuge.

All hunter vehicles must be parked at the Hunter Access sites indicated on the map.

## *Fishing and Boating*



Anglers enjoy fishing from shore or boat on the Washita River and upper end of Foss Reservoir, open from March 15 through October 14. All applicable state laws must be followed. The sand bass run in the spring attracts the most anglers. In winter, shoreline fishing is open along a 2-mile stretch between Pitts Creek and Lakeview Recreation Areas, and in open areas north of Owl Cove.

Boating is permitted from March 15 through October 14. Excessive speed on refuge waters is a safety hazard; please be courteous.

*Wild Turkeys,*  
FWS photograph



## Meeting Your Needs

The refuge office is open from 7:30 am to 4 pm on weekdays.

Winters are fairly mild and summers hot. In spring, be prepared for spring thunderstorms and the possibility of a tornado.



You'll find motels in Clinton, 28 miles to the southeast and Elk City, 28 miles to the southwest. Foss Lake State Park, just south of the refuge, offers camping.

## Help Us Protect the Refuge

Help us protect wildlife habitat—please drive only on designated roads.

Weapons are allowed only in Public Hunting Areas.



Overnight camping, open fires, fireworks, littering, swimming, and water skiing are not allowed on the refuge.



Washita NWR should be a quiet place to enjoy nature—please leave loud radios and other sound equipment at home.



Keep wild things wild—all plants and animals are protected and should not be disturbed or collected (except fish and wildlife legally taken during the refuge hunting and fishing seasons).



Please leave only your footprints; take all litter with you.

(Above)  
*Opossum*  
(Right)  
*Wildflowers*,  
FWS photographs



## **Volunteering at the Refuge**

Contact Washita NWR for information on volunteering to help with the National Migratory Bird Day count the second Saturday in May or the Christmas Bird Count in late December or early January. Expertise in bird identification is helpful but not required.

Volunteers are also needed to help with mammal, reptile, and amphibian surveys and other censuses throughout the year (mainly during spring, summer, and fall).

Other volunteer jobs include data entry, litter removal, trail and building maintenance.

## **Washita NWR Facts**

*Where is it?*

An overlay on a Bureau of Reclamation project, the refuge rests on the northwest portion of Foss Reservoir between the towns of Butler and Hammon in Custer County, Oklahoma. Headquarters and office are located 5 miles west of Butler on State Highway 33, then 1 mile north and one-half mile west.

*When was it established?*

April 15, 1961.

*How big is it?*

8,200 acres.

*Why is it here?*

To provide a feeding and resting area for migrating and wintering waterfowl and sandhill cranes.